



Report of Findings

Livable Communities Coalition
Assistance for Sandy Springs, Georgia

August 3, 2006

LivableCommunitiesCoalition.org

Table of Contents for Report of Findings

Livable Communities Coalition Assistance for Sandy Springs, Georgia

Chapter

I.	PREFACE AND SCOPE OF SERVICES	Page 3
II.	FINDINGS REGARDING THE REDEVELOPMENT OF ROSWELL ROAD, PRESERVATION OF NEIGHBORHOODS, AND QUALITY GROWTH	Page 4
III.	COMPARISON WITH QUALITY GROWTH PRINCIPLES: FINDINGS AND KEY QUESTIONS	Page 5
	A. 2025 Interim Comprehensive Plan	Page 5
	1. Findings	
	2. Key Questions	
	B. Overlay District Ordinance	Page 7
	1. Findings	
	2. Key Question	
	C. Connecting Sandy Springs Study	Page 9
	Findings	
	D. Livable Sandy Springs Plan (LCI)	Page 10
	1. Findings	
	2. Key Questions	
	E. Sandy Springs Central Business District Economic Analysis and Redevelopment Strategy	Page 11
	1. Findings	
	2. Key Questions	

Appendix

1.	Background on Form Based Codes	Page 13
2.	Description of the Livable Communities Coalition and its Services in Communities	Page 14

Report of Findings: Sandy Springs, Georgia

I. PREFACE AND SCOPE OF SERVICES

The Livable Communities Coalition is a diverse network of leaders, community and economic development experts and resources, all aligned to help communities address the opportunities and challenges of growth and development. The City of Sandy Springs partnered with the Coalition in order to receive objective, independent feedback on some of its planning and development tools.

The City of Sandy Springs signed a memorandum of understanding with the Livable Communities Coalition on March 14, 2006. The agreement established a scope of work for the Coalition to complete for the Community Development Department. The scope of services involved a review and critique of the following documents:

- Sandy Springs Overlay District and Proposed Amendment
- Livable Centers Initiative (LCI) Plan
- Interim Comprehensive Plan
- Sandy Springs Central Business District Economic Analysis and Redevelopment Strategy
- Connecting Sandy Springs Study

Specifically, the Coalition reviewed these documents in order to assess their consistency with quality growth principles and to gauge how effective these tools would be in protecting existing neighborhoods and encouraging appropriate redevelopment along Roswell Road. The Coalition has provided feedback on these documents including possible changes to these documents and recommendations on how Sandy Springs might better utilize these assets to create appropriate quality growth redevelopment opportunities.

II. FINDINGS REGARDING THE REDEVELOPMENT OF ROSWELL ROAD, PRESERVATION OF NEIGHBORHOODS, AND QUALITY GROWTH

The eight members of the Livable Community Coalition's Sandy Springs team embraced the three major questions of the scope of work:

- Question 1: how well do these documents encourage and enable the redevelopment of Roswell Road?
- Question 2: how well do these documents work to preserve existing neighborhoods?
- Question 3: how do these documents support or incorporate quality growth principles?

The results of the work are provided in detail in Chapter III; however the summary of key findings for these questions are provided below.

1) Form Based Codes

As the scope of work indicated, the Coalition approached each element with careful attention to redevelopment of Roswell Road and preservation of neighborhoods. Several members of the Coalition team independently found that the city should strongly consider implementing form based codes. The Coalition finds that form based codes could address several concerns including:

- the character of future development and its compatibility with existing neighborhoods,
- the acceptability of appropriate higher density development and redevelopment, and
- the improvement of both function and appearance of future development.

2) Transportation

The Coalition members who reviewed the Connecting Sandy Springs Study and the 2025 Comprehensive Plan raised the possibility that Sandy Springs might improve its approach to traffic congestion by taking bold steps in areas adjacent to the Roswell Road and GA 400 corridors. Through greater emphasis on traffic management, demand management, and interparcel access in and around these corridors, the City may achieve its goals for decreasing congestion.

3) Housing

The Coalition finds that the City should actively pursue housing choices for people of different ages, life-stages, incomes and lifestyles. Achieving a greater housing mixture along the Roswell Road Corridor can be achieved through focused incentives for mixed income developments, enhanced design regulations, and greater assistance/encouragement in the area of property management and community organizing.

4) Questions for Consideration

The Coalition team members indicated that the questions and concerns uncovered through this research represent valuable deliverables on their own. For this reason, key questions for consideration by Sandy Springs' leadership follow all but one of planning document reviews.

III. COMPARISON WITH QUALITY GROWTH PRINCIPLES: FINDINGS AND KEY QUESTIONS

A. 2025 Interim Comprehensive Plan

1. Findings

- a) The Sandy Springs Interim 2025 Comprehensive Plan provides greater detail than the 2025 Fulton County Comprehensive Plan and builds upon progressive elements such as live-work areas. The transition concepts in the 2025 Interim Land Use Plan are well thought out and work toward creating compatible adjacent land uses.
- b) Aligning the City's goals at the broader level with the region's goals can be conducive to the City's long-term growth. The development of Corridor management plans could help the city provide for the needed circulation system to support regional and inter-community travel.
- c) Though the live-work area guidelines are quite detailed, the Comprehensive Plan could be further refined by considering form based zoning. Form based zoning regulates the form of the street – the physical embodiment of the different uses along it. Form-based codes could create unique character areas by clearly defining the building and street relationships.
- d) An economic plan or implementation program is recommended which would incorporate policies, actions, and strategies to attract and retain businesses and create job opportunities in the community.
- e) The City's vision to grow as a regional center implies that there will be significant numbers of trips entering and leaving the activity centers in the peak periods. Currently, GA 400 and I-285, which are already quite congested, are considered as the primary mobility corridors. The City may consider shifting trips to other modes or identifying alternative corridors to accommodate these additional trips in the future.
- f) In order to preserve the quality of existing neighborhoods, the City might consider anchoring neighborhoods around key public areas. The comprehensive plan might establish a goal to identify and then emphasize anchoring elements for neighborhoods. Anchoring can help to define areas, create a sense of place, and maximize amenities. Some examples include: a greenway trail or sidewalk that makes a new connection from a neighborhood to a park or a live-work area based around a shopping district, or neighborhood centered on a school.
- g) In order to avoid the possibility of future ad hoc east-west connections across neighborhoods, the land use plan might consider defining these connections from the outset. Furthermore, it seems probable that existing east-west connections (like Hammond Drive) may eventually function as arterials and not neighborhood streets. Proactively planning the land use along these streets will help preserve the character of the pockets of residential areas from cut-through traffic and unplanned and incompatible development.
- h) The plan makes reference to live-work areas in Sandy Springs which include residential, office and retail uses. If one of the purposes of the live-work areas is to reduce commute trip length or even eliminate commute trips, then providing extra attention to the guidelines for housing in live-work areas might help provide a variety of housing choices.

- i) By drawing connections between different parts of the plan, the City could maximize the usefulness of the plan by integrating the various plan parts.

2. Key Questions

To better integrate the land use and transportation investments in the Comprehensive Plan, the following questions may be considered and addressed:

- a) Can existing and future capacity of the Sandy Springs road network provide a reasonable level of service under the land use scenarios that have been developed?
- b) Does the City's accessibility to regional transit options (MARTA rail) help meet its mobility needs? If not, what transportation investment would be helpful to support Sandy Springs to as a regional center?

B. Overlay District Ordinance

1. Findings

- a) The Overlay District Ordinance could benefit from additional graphic depictions with greater simplicity.
- b) The Overlay District Ordinance would also benefit from revisions which make the document more coherent and concise.
- c) Considering the level of detail of the Overlay District Ordinance, it would seem unnecessary to have a review board, as the guidelines are largely prescriptive. This can be a positive attribute; review boards can be problematic on occasions when they interject too much subjective opinion into a development and design process.

Many developers and designers would prefer to simply have a clear set of guidelines with which to conform and avoid the time and process involved with a review board. If a review board is to be involved, the purpose of the review board should be clearly understood as the maintenance and interpretation of the guidelines, not to advance subjective opinions of board members.

- d) Due to the apparent desire for the areas addressed by the Overlay District ordinance to become urban, walkable, mixed-use environments, it is appropriate for a form-based code to govern development and redevelopment. The current code is a form-based code to an extent, but there are several models of form-based code that have been developed in recent years which would likely provide a better basis. Model form-based codes are typically very graphics-oriented and user-friendly with a logical organization of information. Should it be determined appropriate to replace entirely the current Overlay District Ordinance, then a good form-based code model should be adopted as the starting point for new guidelines. However, if it is determined to be more appropriate to modify and improve the existing Overlay District Ordinance, then much more emphasis should be placed on graphic depictions of design guidelines with Ordinance text serving primarily to supplement graphics.
- e) If the primary stakeholders have not generally bought into a common vision for the future of development, then additional work needs to be accomplished in the area of stakeholder involvement and "authorship" of guidelines. A review board appointed by the Mayor and Council, as described in the Overlay District Ordinance, should be actively involved in the stakeholder outreach process and in efforts to modify regulations. The trade-off that results from employing a more form-based approach to development guidelines is that property owners are afforded more flexibility in terms of land use in exchange for what is typically a higher level of architectural design and construction quality. Stakeholders need to buy into this vision, and this includes the secondary stakeholders (city residents) who can undermine the process if they organize against a project that conforms to the guidelines.
- f) One strategy to consider as a means to promote improved guidelines and general stakeholder support is the sponsorship of a pilot project. In some type of public-private arrangement, the City could become a champion for a project that will be designed and constructed in accordance with desired guidelines and that is markedly different from the conventional development in the area. Such a pilot project can present much more clearly than words the

intent of guidelines and the opportunities afforded to all properties by a new consideration of how to develop. A proactive approach such as a pilot project may also jump-start activity and shorten the time required to achieve substantial redevelopment and change that is envisioned.

2. Key Question

Given the points raised above in the form-based codes section, should the City replace the current Overlay District Ordinance?

C. Connecting Sandy Springs Study

1. Findings

- a) The Connecting Sandy Springs study was very well done with the appropriate analyses of traffic conditions, a comprehensive prioritized list of projects, and great community input. The project list includes new ideas and ideas that have been considered for many years.
- b) In areas like Sandy Springs, transportation projects such as the list developed in the Connecting Sandy Springs study need to be implemented, but consideration should also be given to traffic management and making investments to support land use policies.
- c) The following are three suggestions of preemptive transportation planning activities that might be appropriate to consider.
 - 1) Regarding an inter-parcel connectivity plan, the purpose of this effort is to develop a plan showing connections between private properties for better vehicular and pedestrian circulation. While many similar types of recommendations are included in the Connecting Sandy Springs study, the suggestion here is to anticipate redevelopment activities likely to occur which could create new opportunities for connections. These connections can be private easements which reduce maintenance burdens on the City, and by preparing the plan now, the potential to encourage developers to comply will be much greater.
 - 2) Regarding funding and regulations, inter-parcel connections for new developments and redevelopment projects can be encouraged through regulations and incentives such as density bonuses. Rights-of-way for public projects often will be dedicated at no cost if zoning regulations allow for no loss in density. Impact fees place the burden for infrastructure improvements on projects adding demand to the system and create incentives for developers to construct improvements in lieu of paying the fees.
 - 3) Regarding congestion, managing traffic is always a controversial subject. Traditional thinking says that transportation improvements should satisfy demand, but in many situations, such an attempt actually creates traffic patterns that are impossible to accommodate. An argument can be made that this is the case on Roswell Road. Sandy Springs Circle should be a reasonable alternative to Roswell Road, especially for trips of any significant distance. Except for savvy locals, for the most part, this is simply not the case. The ends of Sandy Springs Circle are not configured, signed or signaled in a way that makes it an attractive alternative to Roswell Road. The traffic signals along Sandy Springs Circle do not convey the impression that a priority is given to moving traffic along the corridor. Additionally, in an attempt to move traffic on Roswell Road, signals penalize left turns and side streets to the point that motorists almost feel as if there is a disincentive to travel anything other than Roswell Road. It is not suggested that an overt effort be undertaken to significantly reduce capacity on Roswell Road, but that consideration be given to finding ways to make Sandy Springs Circle a more attractive alternative.

D. Livable Sandy Springs Plan (LCI)

The Sandy Springs Central Business District Economic Analysis and Redevelopment Strategy provides valuable detail regarding lingering inconsistencies between the original LCI recommendations, the 2025 Fulton County Comprehensive Plan and earlier amendments to ordinances and regulations.

1. Findings

- a) Regarding housing choices, the goals of the LCI plan call for a “jobs-to-housing” ratio, accessory units in single-family zoning districts, net residential density up to 40 units per acre, and zoning density bonuses available for mixed use developments and for setting aside a percentage of new housing at affordable prices in mixed-income developments. However, the current land use map paints a different picture. Within the study area, apartment zoning categories have not increased.
- b) The City seems to prefer redevelopment of existing apartments rather than rehabilitating their existing apartments. The City seems to favor redevelopment in the form of different uses such as condominium conversion, mixed use development, condominiums, or townhome development.
- c) There is no mention of zoning density bonuses for mixed-use development or workforce housing mentioned in the Sandy Springs Overlay District or surrounding zoning classifications.

2. Key Questions

- a) How can the City regulate appearance and design and remain consistent with community preferences and goals?
- b) How can the City develop and implement its own unique character?
- c) How can the city come to consensus on allowable density?

E. Sandy Springs Central Business District Economic Analysis and Redevelopment Strategy

1. Findings

- a) The report adequately demonstrates that land prices demand higher intensity development.
- b) The report raises unaddressed questions and apparent conflicts in strategy. Specifically, concerns are raised in the following areas:
 - 1) infrastructure, traffic volume, and automobile/pedestrian conflicts and the potential for unanticipated public expenses to remedy them (water and sewer excluded because the City does not provide these services),
 - 2) the ability to create a Decatur-like environment on a foundation that is not similar to Decatur's, and
 - 3) the ability to phase and control redevelopment in a large area over an extended time.

2. Key Questions

- 1) Pedestrians and Cars - the vision is one of a pedestrian friendly live/work/shop development along Roswell Road.
 - a. How can the City provide a better environment for pedestrians given the proposed increases in parking (potential for pedestrian-auto conflict)?
 - b. Roswell Road currently accommodates a large volume of through traffic, often reaching a point of breakdown. The plan, if successfully implemented, would transform the CBD to a destination area, adding even more traffic to Roswell Road:
 - i. How can the increased traffic be accommodated?
 - ii. Are the land values that serve as the basis of the analysis sustainable in the face of increased traffic?
 - iii. Can a pedestrian friendly environment be built around Roswell Road?
- 2) The proposed new zoning would more than double the intensity of allowed development.
 - a. Can the City manage traffic on Roswell Road?
 - b. Are the water and sewer systems (though not provided by the City) adequate to handle the demands of increased land use intensity?
- 3) Financial Resources - the public expenditures discussed in the reviewed document are limited to parking, green space, and inducements to private developers.
 - a. Is financing flexible enough to accommodate any expansions of the water and sewer systems if needed?
 - b. If there is a solution to Roswell Road, is money is available for implementation?

- c. Is introduction of development impact fees to the mix of funding sources for basic infrastructure viable?
- 4) Emulating Decatur - an objective of the strategy is to emulate the design and atmosphere of downtown Decatur.
 - a. Decatur is an older urban center built at a time pre-dating automobile use. Presently, downtown Decatur is served by a rapid transit station. A massive high volume through traffic arterial does not bisect the area.
 - b. The basic design – grid system, short blocks, small lots, and limited space devoted to moving and parking autos, public transit orientation – provided the physical foundation for new development in downtown Decatur.
 - c. The Sandy Springs central business district does not have this kind of foundation.
 - i. Can Decatur be emulated without an existing pedestrian oriented physical foundation?
 - ii. If not, is the vision ultimately feasible? If not, can a more amenable foundation be developed? What is the cost and funding source?
- 5) Extent of Redevelopment - the proposed area to be redeveloped is essentially an almost one mile (4,800 feet) long linear area stretching along Roswell Road. Assuming an average lot depth of 400 feet, there is 1,920,000 square feet of land (44.1 acres) in the area. At an allowable FAR of 2.2, the future build-out is 4,224,000 square feet of floor area (97.0 acres).
 - a. Assuming a build-out period of 20 years, is the market sufficient to support this much space, especially in the face of competition for development investment nearer Georgia 400 and Perimeter Mall?
 - b. A one mile stretch is a large area to control. Is redevelopment to be concentrated and phased in the area, perhaps creating needed market massing (as well as opportunities for traffic control), or is zoning the only development control envisioned?
 - c. One quarter of a mile is generally considered a maximum length for pedestrian shopping environments. Can the strategy and phasing, as well as placement of parking, be shaped to recognize this dimension?
- 6) Municipal Management - phasing of redevelopment, creation of large public parking reservoirs, use of TAD financing, and other elements of the redevelopment strategy for such a large area imply a strong central agency with ability to control land use, ability identify and provide needed public infrastructure, ability to generate public financing and forge public/private partnerships and use the power of eminent domain that is explicitly a part of TAD backed redevelopment.
 - a. Is the TAD increment potential in the area sufficient to support an agency and effort of this scope?
 - b. Is the City of Sandy Springs prepared to back, politically and financially, an agency and effort of this scope?

Appendix 1: Form Based Codes

Form-based codes are an alternative to conventional codes and rely upon diagramming of location, building envelope standards and architectural standards. Conventional zoning is primarily premised on the segregation of land uses whereby the implementation of traditional neighborhood design is difficult at best. With form-based codes however, “use-based” restrictions of conventional zoning are overcome through strategic definition of the spatial pattern of a community, block, or building. Size, form and placement of buildings and parking are flexible within the regulations of form-based codes allowing for mixed-use, enabling the developer to meet changes in the market.

Form-based codes often consist of illustrations and graphics while conventional codes rely almost entirely on written regulations. There are still regulations for the developer such as building height and footprint; however, with form-based codes there is more flexibility as to which types of developments may be included in the overall project design. As opposed to being designed on a piecemeal basis, developments under form-based codes are linked to a comprehensive vision for the area and thus emphasize the development pattern and the interrelationships between parcels.

Form-based codes may include property locations plans, building envelope standards, and/or architectural standards. Regulating plans include the maps of each of the districts within the redevelopment area and indicate which type of building can be built at any location within a district. Building envelope standards include specifications for height, fenestration, siting and use for any building within the redevelopment area. The architectural standards outline recommended materials and configuration of building construction. They include guidelines for signage, lighting, and other aesthetic factors. Streetscape standards cover trees, landscaping, sidewalk dimensions and open space.

The code is essentially a legal document that regulates land development by setting controls on building form. Implementation requires formal municipal adoption following a multi-stakeholder participatory process. An initial community existing conditions inventory sets the stage for development of a code that fits local characteristics. Often a public visioning charrette is held whereby input from the community and recommendations from design professionals combine to develop a feasible plan for future development. Lastly, determination of the appropriate spatial basis for regulation by district, street, or special zones defines how the code will be defined and regulated.

Additional resources:

- Dover, Victor; Alternative Methods for Land Use Regulation available at http://www.spikowski.com/victor_dover.htm
- The Form-Based Code Institute available at <http://www.formbasedcodes.org/index.html>
- Local Government Commission; Form-Based Codes: Implementing Smart Growth available http://www.lgc.org/freepub/PDF/Land_Use/fact_sheets/form_based_codes.pdf
- Sitkowski, Robert and Brian Ohm. Form-Based Land Development Regulations available at http://www.formbasedcodes.org/images/FBCI_Sitkowski_Urban_Lawyer.pdf

Appendix 2: Description of the Livable Communities Coalition and its Services to Communities

The Coalition consists of a diverse network of organizations, companies, and individuals who share a commitment to quality growth and are aligned to help the community address the opportunities and challenges of growth and development.

The organization was formed in 2005 as the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce Quality Growth Task Force recognized the need for a credible coalition of business, environmental, development, civic, neighborhood and academic groups to work on implementation of quality growth and to stimulate a better informed public discussion on growth-related issues. The Livable Communities Coalition was founded on the principles of the Livable Communities Compact for the Atlanta Region:

- Communities should support greater housing choices, higher densities and mixed uses in appropriate areas of our region's centers and transportation corridors.
- Transportation investments should be integrated with land use in the region's centers and corridors.
- Housing choices should be increased by removing barriers that artificially restrict the market. In turn, developers must respond by offering quality housing products which are innovative and consistent with community desires, and the financial community must respond by reducing barriers to development financing.
- Greenfield development must preserve more open space, leverage existing and programmed infrastructure, and provide more market choices.

Coalition members lend their expert assistance and resources to support new development projects in key parts of the region. The Coalition supports communities that have developed quality growth plans, but have encountered hindrances or obstacles to implementing these plans. The staff of the Coalition will mobilize resources and information of the Coalition for the benefit of selected communities. The Livable Communities Coalition is an independent non-profit organization; no fees will be collected by the Coalition for services provided to communities.